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Emerald

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**The diversity of befriending by, and of, older people**

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# The diversity of befriending by, and of, older people

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## Abstract

### *Purpose*

There is increasing interest in befriending services that aim to combat loneliness among older people. This article uses the framework of the Equality Act 2010 to consider why older people might need these services and why some groups may be under represented.

### *Design/methodology/approach*

Databases, websites and other resources were searched systematically for material on befriending. Eighty items, ranging from research articles, reports, and toolkits, were included in a scoping review about befriending. The searches were updated in April 2016.

### *Findings*

Individual face to face befriending has been the mainstay of the type of befriending support for older people. The increasing diversity of the older population and reductions in funding has led to adaptations of this model for different groups living in different circumstances.

### *Research limitations/implications*

The resources and time available to conduct the review were limited. It is possible that some relevant material was not identified.

### *Practical implications*

Practitioners working with older people need to know about befriending schemes available in their area and consider the reasons why some groups of older people might be reluctant to use them or require specialist schemes.

### *Originality/value*

Existing research on befriending rarely reports the demographic characteristics of those using the service in detail or considers why some groups of older people might have greater needs for befriending services or be reluctant to use them. The Equality Act 2010 provides a structured framework for considering diversity in access to, and use of, services.

## Keywords

Befriending, older people, diversity, Equality Act 2010

## Introduction and background

There is increasing recognition of the potential harms caused by loneliness and unwanted isolation (Holt-Lunstad *et al.*, 2015), perhaps typified in the widespread publicity given to the claim from the *Campaign to End Loneliness* (Undated) that loneliness is as harmful to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. While the social capital and social networks that are thought to help prevent loneliness may be informal and organic, many faith-based, voluntary sector or community projects organise themselves in more formal relationships offering social contact to lonely individuals or groups. 'Befriending' is a common term used to convey aspects of these types of relationship. The Oxford English Dictionary dates this specific use of the word (as opposed to acting as a friend to another person) back to the 1960s and the establishment of the Samaritans.

The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation describes befriending as:

*A voluntary, mutually beneficial and purposeful relationship in which an individual gives time to support another to enable them to make changes in their life.*

(2011, p. 2)

It goes on to outline what it sees as the four main purposes of befriending:

- *Specific/targeted* (e.g., to find education, employment, stop re-offending, integrate into the community, develop a career).
- *Change behaviour* (e.g., to improve relationships, reduce unwanted behaviours).
- *Expand opportunities* (e.g., to develop personal skills, build confidence, improve attainment).
- *Supportive* (e.g., to build trust and resilience, reduce isolation).

(2011, pp. 3-4)

Insofar as befriending schemes for older people are concerned, it is the supportive aspect of befriending that is currently the most important, although other aspects may be counted among the secondary aims. Professionals may 'signpost' or refer older people to such schemes, but may also want to encourage individuals to accept this form of support, offer schemes advice over training, managing relationship boundaries, and dynamics, or be willing to step in if befrienders feel that the relationship is becoming more complex than they can manage. Equally, professionals may encourage older people that they too can contribute to society by taking on a role as a volunteer befriender to increase their own wellbeing and sense of esteem. In community development activities there is room for setting up and organising befriending schemes. For those with commissioning or funding roles their work may encompass the commissioning of befriending schemes as an evidence based approach to the promotion of wellbeing (variously defined).

In the rollback of public sector funding and the context of loneliness being seen as a major social problem among older people in the UK (Thomas, 2015) and in other parts of the

developed world (Windle *et al.*, 2011), there is renewed interest in befriending schemes as offering a comparatively low cost preventative service to a wide range of people (Knapp *et al.*, 2011).

The Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) considers:

*... investment into preventative interventions such as befriending that address the emotional and physical well being needs of a person, particularly during periods of adverse transition may help protect against later life depression, disability and chronic health conditions. Commissioners within Adult Social Care will ... need to ensure that they commission services that achieve the greatest health gains, deliver on investment and reduce health inequalities.*

(ADASS, 2014, p. 18)

In this article, we argue that this cannot be achieved without understanding more about the profile of people using befriending services and the barriers that may deter others from using them. We use results from a systematic scoping and meta-ethnography of befriending (Authors, 2012, 2016, details omitted at review stage) to present our current state of knowledge about the acceptability and benefits of befriending to an increasingly diverse population of older people. We conclude that befriending services will increasingly need to achieve diversity among service users and volunteers if they are continue to play a major role in services for older people.

**Methods**

We were commissioned by (omitted at review stage) to undertake a literature review about a range of services used by older people, including befriending, assessing the findings against framework of the *Equality Act 2010*. We updated and repeated the searches in April 2016 to see if recent interest in befriending (for example, Balaam, 2015) included consideration of the ability of befriending services to meet the needs and preferences of different groups of older people, as we had concluded that this was largely absent in earlier research.

The detailed methods are described elsewhere (authors, 2016). In brief, the following electronic bibliographic databases were searched using a mixture of fixed term and free text words for material on befriending published in English between 2001 and 2016: AgeInfo; Embase; MEDLINE; PsycINFO; Social Care Online; and Web of Science. We also undertook internet searches, and interrogated the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence Evidence Search and the publication platform Ingenta Connect. We accessed websites, such as Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (2015) and Befriending Networks (2016), to identify reports and other grey literature not abstracted in the bibliographic databases. An appeal had been made via a network of organisations and researchers interested in equality and diversity but this did not result in any additional material.

**Findings**

We identified 279 items (including duplicates), of which we retrieved 80 for full text analysis. Many of these included toolkits (for example, Befriending Network (Scotland),

2010) and case studies (for example, Mulvihill, 2011b) rather than accounts of specific research projects. After discussing terminology and different types of befriending, we present our findings using the framework of the following protected characteristics covered by the *Equality Act 2010*: age; gender; disability; sexual orientation; gender reassignment; religion; and ethnicity.

### *Terminology*

The word 'befriending' may come across as patronising and imply that the relationship is one sided (Cattan *et al.*, 2009). As a consequence, alternatives such as 'circle' (Age UK, 2010) or 'buddy' (ADASS, 2014) are sometimes used. While relationships between befrienders and those who are befriended may evolve into friendship (Andrews *et al.*, 2003; Lester *et al.*, 2012), there is a risk that some of those who are befriended may see befriending as the same as friendship when this relationship may be neither desirable nor possible (Jamieson, 2008). In contrast, Ward *et al.* (2012) argue against such strict distinctions and highlight the salience of the word 'friendship', suggesting that the focus needs to be on co-productive working and capturing the diffuse nature of support and resources that exist.

### *Befriending models*

Overall, the three main models of befriending are:

- individual;
- group; and
- telephone befriending.

Devine (2014) also identifies two examples of email befriending but it would appear that older people's access to befriending via the internet or social media remains an under-explored area.

Instead, individual befriending, whereby a volunteer visits an older person in his or her home (Andrews *et al.*, 2003), remains the most common form of befriending. The older person may then choose to stay in or go out with the volunteer's assistance. There are also befriending schemes for older people living in care homes (Downey, 2011). Other schemes are increasingly focused on 'going out', such as a Dementia Friends model of befriending in Liverpool where the aim is to provide outdoors stimulation and reminiscence, as well as exercise (Phillips and Evans, 2016).

Group befriending provides opportunities for individuals facing similar problems to exchange information and discuss worries with others who have a shared understanding and can offer solutions based on their own experiences (Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, 2010). It can also involve taking part in shared social or leisure activities, such as playing sport.

Telephone befriending can be delivered on an individual (Cattan *et al.*, 2011) or group (Fitzsimons, 2010) basis. Such schemes may be particularly focused on people with mobility problems or isolation in rural areas (Manthorpe and Livsey, 2009). Other services, such as *Silverline*, aim to provide an information and advice service as well as access to ongoing

support (Callan, 2013). Compared with face to face befriending, telephone befriending is thought to offer a lower level, lower cost, and lower risk intervention, with befrienders offering support from their home or workplace (Cattan *et al.*, 2009; Cattan *et al.*, 2011).

*Why people using befriending services tend to be older*

Eighteen per cent of people aged 85 and over report they often, or always, feel lonely compared with 13 per cent of those aged 75-84 and six per cent of those aged 65-74 (Victor *et al.*, 2005). As loneliness is an important reason for wanting to use befriending services, this helps explain why the majority of service users are in their 80s or 90s (Andrews *et al.*, 2003; Peardon *et al.*, 2010; Lester *et al.*, 2012). Of course, loneliness (as opposed to choosing to be alone) can be felt at any age but people aged 80 and over are more likely to have experienced events associated with a greater risk of loneliness, such as the loss of a partner, changes to social networks as a result of bereavement or illness, or poorer physical health than their younger counterparts (Victor *et al.*, 2005).

The links between ageing and loneliness highlight the importance for professionals of knowing about local befriending schemes' capacities. If, for example, there are long waiting lists or a lack of volunteers (as there may well be), it may be false hope to suggest an older person takes the step of considering a befriending scheme. Explaining that it may be time limited, for example, to the weeks just after a hospital stay, may help avoid misconceptions of longer friendship. There are indications of a trend towards more time limited befriending interventions (for example, Lawlor *et al.*, 2014). This suggests that befriending may be seen in the future as a way of re-establishing and expanding social networks, rather than offering an open ended relationship between befrienders and people using the service.

*Gender and befriending – the link with living alone*

More women than men use befriending services for older people (Andrews *et al.*, 2003; Peardon *et al.*, 2010). This broadly relates to women's greater life expectancy and the tendency for heterosexual women to marry men older than themselves. This makes them more likely to experience widowhood than men and join the increasing numbers of people living alone. As we discuss later, proportionally more lesbian, gay and bisexual older men and women also live alone (Guasp, 2011), but it is too soon to tell if changes to marriage laws and the introduction of civil partnerships will alter this pattern.

Two other factors that professionals working with older people need to consider are changing divorce rates and increases in men's life expectancy. The number of so-called 'grey divorces' is increasing and bucks an overall trend towards a reduction in divorce rates since the 1990s (Office for National Statistics, 2013). The longstanding gap between women and men's life expectancy is also beginning to narrow, with one estimate suggesting that it will have fallen to two years by 2030 (Bennett *et al.*, 2015). At the moment, over three quarters of people aged 85 and over living alone are women (Office for National Statistics, 2014) but changes in men's life expectancy could narrow this gender gap.

When differences in marital status, health, and living arrangements are controlled for, the number of men and women experiencing loneliness is very similar (Victor *et al.*, 2006). However, it appears that men experiencing loneliness are less likely to seek help than



women (Beach and Bamford, 2014). In recent years, there has been great interest in the way in which gendered interventions, such as Men in Sheds, might help older men (Milligan *et al.*, 2013) but there does not seem to be any evidence whether men experiencing loneliness are less likely than women to be offered befriending services or if they are more likely to refuse to use them. We do know that women are more likely to be befrienders (Bignall, 2016) so it is possible that some men choose not to use a befriending service because they would prefer to be matched with a male befriender. The converse may equally apply.

#### *Rates of disability among those using befriending services*

Long term conditions, such as diabetes or cancer, are the most frequent cause of disability in countries that are classified as being more developed, such as the United Kingdom. Many people using befriending services have one or more long term condition. This is because their ability to go out independently is often compromised. A large clinical trial of telephone befriending (Mountain *et al.*, 2014) tentatively concluded that there was some evidence that befriending could help maintain good mental health but highlighted the challenges of recruiting volunteers and running a service. It warned against over optimistic ideas about what might be possible.

A new area of inquiry is whether the intended outcomes of befriending need to become more tailored to the needs of different people. For example, the question arises whether befriending for people with dementia should focus on the 'quality of the moment' (Befriending Network (Scotland), 2010) but more work is needed in this area.

Victor and Bowling (2012) argue that better treatment of long term conditions could help reduce levels of loneliness (thereby reducing the number of people needing befriending services and other health and care support related to loneliness). Two befriending schemes for Bangladeshi people with stroke (Palin and Hegarty, 2010) and Bangladeshi and Somali people with Type 2 diabetes (Begum, 2010) aimed to help people manage their long-term health conditions and become more active in their community. Examples of activities included befrienders helping people go shopping, attend exercise classes, and hospital appointments (Begum, 2010).

Professionals working with older people are often asked to collect detailed information on service users' health. However, Cattani *et al.* (2009) found that some people found the health questions that they wanted to ask were off-putting. A challenge for organisations supporting older people is to find simple and effective ways of obtaining this information.

#### *Sexual identity and sexual orientation – the need for specialist befriending?*

Research with older lesbian, gay and bisexual people has emphasised the existence of both risk (Fredriksen-Goldsen *et al.*, 2013) and protective factors (Hughes and Kentlyn, 2011) for social support and loneliness with ageing. The risk factors are strongly associated with the experience of discrimination which may impact upon their relationships with some family members, neighbours, and the wider community. The protective ones stem from a sense of mutual solidarity and support.



The absence of research into the social networks of transgender older people means that we do not know about their potential need for befriending services. Hines (2007) suggested that some people who had gender reassignment and transitioned completely into their chosen gender lost contact with other transgender people and no longer chose to identify with the transgender community. For others, particularly those who have been rejected by family and friends as a result of their choices, the discrimination that they have experienced throughout their lives can mean that they sometimes feel very isolated (Whittle *et al.*, 2007). Both transgender (Siverskog, 2015) and lesbian, gay and bisexual older people (Guasp, 2011) may be reluctant to access befriending services, especially if their previous experiences of health and social care services have been negative.

Opening Doors London (2014) is the biggest voluntary organisation providing information and support services with and for older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in the United Kingdom. Its befriending service matches older LGBT people with LGBT volunteers. An earlier evaluation (Phillips and Knocker, 2010) found that people using the befriending service had significant physical or mental health problems which prevented them from building or sustaining their own social support networks. They also experienced social exclusion due to their sexual orientation and health problems, so they did not feel confident accessing mainstream services.

This highlights the lack of specialist schemes and the need for practitioners to link with national support groups to collect information for potential service users as well as the importance of local schemes commitment to being LGBT friendly. This can be demonstrated by the images used in publicity material, unconscious bias training for staff and volunteers, and recruiting a diverse volunteer force.

*Ethnicity – unrecorded and under researched*

The relationship between ethnicity, social support, and loneliness is very complicated with factors such as socio-economic status, household size, and health playing an important part in influencing people's experiences, leading to differences *within* as well as *between* different ethnic groups (Moriarty and Butt, 2004).

It is rare for studies of befriending to report participants' ethnicity. Lester *et al.* (Lester *et al.*, 2012) recruited participants from five befriending schemes and commented that although their research did not include any participants from a minority ethnic group, this reflected the ethnic background of local service users.

By contrast, a study of Asian carers living in an unspecified part of England found that befriending services were 'greatly appreciated' (Hepworth, 2005, p. 337). In some instances, befriending was seen as a more culturally acceptable service than offers of help with personal care. Having a befriender enabled family carers to have time off for other household tasks or for a break. As with the befriending services for Bangladeshi and Somali people with long term conditions (Begum, 2010; Palin and Hegarty, 2010) mentioned earlier, the importance of ethnically matched befrienders was emphasised.

### *Religion and belief*

Religious affiliation is recorded rarely in UK published studies of befriending, although it may be one of the factors used to match volunteers and service users. Hepworth's (2005) study of Asian carers recorded that 24 of the 26 participants were Muslim but that their ethnicity included people from Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds.

Many faith-based organisations do provide befriending services but these services vary locally and their diversity is hard to capture. A study of services for older people provided by the Catholic community noted that they were also used by people of other faiths, and also none, but the broad scope of this study meant that there was very little information specifically on befriending (Ryan *et al.*, 2009).

Beyond these examples, we could not find any published accounts exploring whether people of different faiths or none are more or less likely to need or access befriending services. The implications for professionals are that good linkages to faith communities may be helpful in developing support plans and developing community capacity.

### **Volunteers and their activity**

Some befriending schemes try to match a potential befriender with an older person on the basis of a possible combination of shared interests and backgrounds and practical matters, such as preferences for the frequency and timing of visits or whether or not the befriender needs to be a car driver. In a sample of white older people aged 55-92 using befriending services, participants thought benders' friendliness and social skills were more important than what they had in common – they thought that shared interests often emerged over time and could develop together (Lester *et al.*, 2012). For younger service users, being matched with a person of a similar age is sometimes considered to be important but there are examples where young benders are welcomed by older people for providing inter-generational contact. Such an example is provided in a recent report of a study in Australia where three students befriended older people as part of their course of study (Stephens *et al.*, 2016).

At some times, it may be helpful for benders and those using the service to have circumstances in common. For instance, the need to speak a community language may be an important criterion in befriender recruitment (Begum, 2010; Palin and Hegarty, 2010). In the same way, Opening Doors (2014) matches LGBT service users with LGBT volunteers. Similarly, while we know that religious or cultural backgrounds may mean that having a befriender who shares the same religious affiliation might be important for some potential users of befriending services (Hepworth, 2005), we do not know how this impacts on actual experiences.

Among younger people with disabilities, peer befriending is common but this model seems rarer in services for older people, although examples exist, such as a RNIB Outreach Peer Support project for people with sight loss (Gibson *et al.*, 2007) and the diabetes peer support scheme in Tower Hamlets (Begum, 2010). Telephone befriending may offer new opportunities for peer support among older people who have difficulties leaving their

homes (Cattan *et al.*, 2009). However, there is no evidence as to whether older people prefer peer support or if it is more effective.

It should not be assumed that matching will work in the absence of other shared interests. A recent study of a befriending service for carers of people with dementia in which most of the befrienders recruited were former carers found many elements in common, although the volunteers were more likely to be female (Charlesworth *et al.*, 2016). Burnell *et al* (2015) also found that most of those consulted about the workings of such a service expressed a view that ‘standard scripts’ were inappropriate and that listening was the most valued activity to offer.

Professionals may have a key role in recruitment of befrienders (Andrews *et al.*, 2003). In the Tower Hamlets peer support project, a community advocacy group was used to help recruit and train befrienders (Begum, 2010). If it is especially important that befrienders are matched (perhaps for language reasons, gender, experience or other shared characteristics), then it may be easier to recruit a telephone befriender (Cattan *et al.*, 2009). Telephone befriending calls tend to be shorter than face to face visits so one befriender may be able to support more than one person. There is however little research on how professionals may help small and struggling befriending schemes to expand or sustain their activities, but pointing to their effectiveness in prevention may assist in developing bids (Knapp *et al.*, 2010), especially in being able to demonstrate the outcomes that are being delivered (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014).

**Discussion**

There are more than 500 different befriending projects for older people in the UK (Mulvihill, 2011a) and their sheer variety in terms of size and purpose makes it difficult to generalise. Most befriending services for older people have traditionally been generic and have tried to ensure that their service is an inclusive one in which all older people, whatever their background, feel welcome and that there is reciprocity in the befriending relationship. However, there are signs that some schemes are having to be more ‘exclusive’ or wish to focus on specific circumstances. Thus, variation is likely to increase.

New formulations of befriending as part of community responses to people with dementia look set to change the befriending landscape with their focus on people with dementia and on dementia carers; the possibility that Dementia Friends can offer company and stimulation in the moment to people with dementia in a range of living situations, and of the blurring of individual and group contacts. Such initiatives might do well to heed the befriending research that points to the need to address equalities in such initiatives (authors).

This review has highlighted that there is very little research into professional use of befriending schemes as part of their support of older people. We also know very little about befriending in terms of older people’s contributions themselves; both as befriending volunteers but also as volunteers who are charged with the stewardship of voluntary sector and community groups taking on this commitment.

We do not know whether the generally positive views about befriending are shared equally across everyone – partly because those with negative experiences are presumably likely to end the relationship. This is because - irrespective of study design – the research that is currently available does not make these comparisons. Neither does it include the views of those who have given up the service.

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